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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: (SBU) PM MOVES TO NIP SECTARIANISM IN THE BUD

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1. (C) Summary: The liberation of Iraq's Shiite majority has increased the assertiveness of Kuwaiti Shiites (about one-third of Kuwaitis), who were already making progress against institutionalized discrimination. They now have their own family-law court, more building permits for mosques, approval for their own Waqf, and markedly increased religious freedom. This year, for the first time in memory, they were allowed to stage a public reenactment of the Battle of Karbala during Ashoura. The vast majority of Shiites here stress they are Kuwaiti first and Shiite second; when the young militant Yasser al-Habib fell afoul of the law for insulting Sunni beliefs, the Shia establishment condemned the provocation while quietly lobbying for clemency. Predictably, Sunni extremists have become more stridently hostile towards Shiite practices. Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmed has met separately with the various religious and political groupings in an attempt to nip sectarianism in the bud. End Summary.

Shia/Sunni relations

2. (S) Nearly all of our Shiite interlocutors profess loyalty to the State of Kuwait and attempt to downplay any sectarian differences. But scratch a bit deeper and many Shia can also tell you how they or their family members have been affected by a system that limits their employment in certain sectors and denies them full religious freedom. The prosperity of Kuwaiti society makes it easier to tolerate the institutionalized discrimination (as a Shiite lawyer told Poloff, Shia in Kuwait are much better off than anywhere else), but it's there: the Faculty of Sharia offers no courses from a Shiite perspective; the disproportion in mosques is glaring; it is very difficult for a Shiite to become a diplomat or enter certain branches of the security forces (KSS, the State Security service, has no/no Shiites).

3. (SBU) Although the GOK does not publish exact figures, it is generally estimated that Shiite citizens number roughly 300,000) 350,000, i.e. about a third of the approximately 900,000 Kuwaitis living here. As would be expected, the Shiite minority traces its roots mainly to Iraq and Iran. It has played an integral role in the economic development of the country, and many of the leading commercial families are Shiites (Behbehani, Dashti, Bukhamseen, Marafie, Qabazard) who have benefited from family ties to neighboring states. Throughout most of Kuwait's history, Sunnis and Shiites have lived side by side with little conflict.

4. (SBU) The nadir of Sunni-Shiite relations came in the heady days of the Iranian Revolution; the GOK reacted to a perceived threat by silencing and expelling Shiite radicals. During this period, which included the 1983 bombings of the US and French Embassies, purportedly by an Iran-based Shiite group, our interlocutors tell us Shiites faced open hostility from a Sunni majority that questioned their loyalty. One Shiite activist recalled schoolyard taunts from Sunni children who referred to him as Khomeini.

5. (SBU) The 1990 Iraqi invasion strengthened all citizens' sense of Kuwaitiness and allowed Shia to prove their loyalty, according to our contacts. Shiites played a large role in the Kuwaiti resistance, and were heavily represented among Kuwait's war dead. By then, of course, the bloom was off the Iran Revolution's rose. Relations between Sunnis and Shia have been steadily improving since liberation in 1991.

Shiite Strides Over The Past Year

6. (SBU) Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Shiite MPs and other Shi'a leaders have approached the GOK on a number of long-standing requests for reform, and have made some headway:

- Waqf: The establishment of a Ja'afari Waqf, i.e. an agency to administer religious endowments according to the Shiite Ja'afari school of jurisprudence, has long been a demand of Kuwait's Shi'a population. The government has approved its creation and it is in the process of being established.

- Family-law court: Family law in Kuwait is handled by religious courts. Shi'a now have their own courts of first

instance and appeal, though still no court of cassation (supreme court). Shi'a have formally requested a Ja'afari court of cassation and an increase in the number of Shi'a Ja'afari judges to handle Shi'a personal status and family law cases. In late 2003, the government approved their requests. The court has not yet been established, however, as there are no Ja'afari judges for this level of prosecution.

- Approval of Shiite mosques: There are approximately 30 Shi'a mosques and approximately 1,200 Sunni mosques in Kuwait. Since 2000, the government has granted licenses for and has approved the construction of 4 new Shi'a mosques. All 4 mosques are reportedly still under construction.

- This year for the first time, Kuwaiti Shi'a publicly staged a historical play during Ashoura depicting the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson.

17. (SBU) There can be little doubt that events in Iraq have stimulated a more assertive stance by Kuwaiti Shiites. For the first time in memory, Kuwait TV ran programs on Ashoura and the authorities allowed a public reenactment of the Battle of Karbala. At least one young Shiite militant, 21-year-old Yasser al-Habib, went beyond what the GOK was prepared to tolerate when he distributed an audiocassette last December that was deemed insulting to Sunnis. He was tried, convicted and sentenced, then released -- apparently by mistake -- as part of the Amiri Pardon on the occasion of National Day in February. A warrant for his arrest was issued, but at last report he remained at large. The Shia establishment publicly distanced itself from the offending cassette and condemned any attempt to foment sectarianism, but influential Shiites quietly asked Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah to show clemency to al-Habib.

Reaction From Sunnis

18. (SBU) The vast majority of Kuwaitis, both Sunni and Shia, are keen to preserve peaceful, friendly co-existence, but the most hardline Sunnis have reacted badly, e.g. distributing scurrilous anti-Shia leaflets outside Sunni mosques. The fact that the Information Minister (longtime UN PermRep Mohammed Abulhassan) is both a Shiite and a liberal has made him a prime target for Salafi members of parliament. They keep threatening to "grill" him (a longstanding procedure that can lead a vote of no-confidence which, if successful, would force the minister from office). Some of what they criticize Abulhassan for has more to do with his being a liberal than with his being a Shiite, e.g. licensing entertainment they consider immoral, such as "Arab Super Star" and "Star Academy."

19. (SBU) Recent events in Iraq have incensed Sunni hardliners. In the April 12 newspapers, the spokesman for the Salafi Movement (aka Scientific Salafis - the most radical overt Islamist current) condemned the US for "savage" attacks on Falluja, and called for moral and material support to defeat the American "enemy" whose military presence in the region "is no longer justified" (now that Saddam's regime has been eliminated). The next day, the Salafi Movement participated in a meeting to launch a "parliamentary and popular committee to assist the Iraqi people"; about twenty people, including two Members of Parliament, attended; virtually all wore typical Salafi garb. Our Salafi contacts regularly insist that Shiites are a minority in Iraq (and only about 15 percent of Kuwaitis); they perceive that the US is siding with Iraq's Shiites (and Kurds) against Sunni Arabs.

110. (SBU) The GOK maintains a strong public commitment to tolerance: Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmed was quoted in the local media April 14 as saying the Shia are a key category in Kuwaiti society and should be given their full rights. Notwithstanding opposition from Sunni Islamists, he has also been quoted as promising that popular entertainment shows will continue. But he clearly sees cause for concern: over the past several days, he has held a series of meetings with all the political and religious currents, as well as tribal leaders. To all, the message was clear: sectarianism will not be tolerated in Kuwait. While Kuwaitis overwhelmingly support that message, some fault the PM for implicitly validating incipient notions of sectarian identity by meeting separately with groups according to their religious affiliation (Shiites, Sunnis associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis); these critics say he would have reinforced the sense of national unity if he had either brought them all together or held meetings on a geographic basis (neighborhoods or governorates).

111. (C) COMMENT: We expect the Shiite community to remain peaceful and loyal. More telling will be the trajectory of Sunni radicalism, and the regime's reaction to it. So far the Government has been unwilling to take on the Sunni radicals as strongly as it has Shia radicalism. Until recently, Kuwait's Islamists have differed from those in other countries by recognizing the need for, and reality of, US protection from an Arab Muslim enemy -- Saddam Hussein.

Now that Saddam and his regime have been removed, some no longer feel the need to maintain that exception to reflexive enmity towards the US. But the line of thinking articulated by the Scientific Salafis runs counter to obvious Kuwaiti interests: most people in this small country understand perfectly well that they cannot afford a US military pullout while Iraq remains insecure; most also understand that the perpetrators of atrocities in Falluja, though they may be Sunni Arabs, need to be brought to heel -- and are in any event hostile to the independent existence of Kuwait, let alone a democratic Iraq.

12. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The Scientific Salafis' stated position need not imply an endorsement of violence against Americans inside Kuwait: they recognize their regime as legitimate and Islamic, acknowledge that US forces are its guests, and affirm the religious duty to ensure the safety of such guests. Still, some young hothead with little aptitude for nuance could feel authorized to attack Americans here. And it is no stretch at all to interpret their call as out-and-out incitement to kill Americans in Iraq or elsewhere outside Kuwait.
MORAN